

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

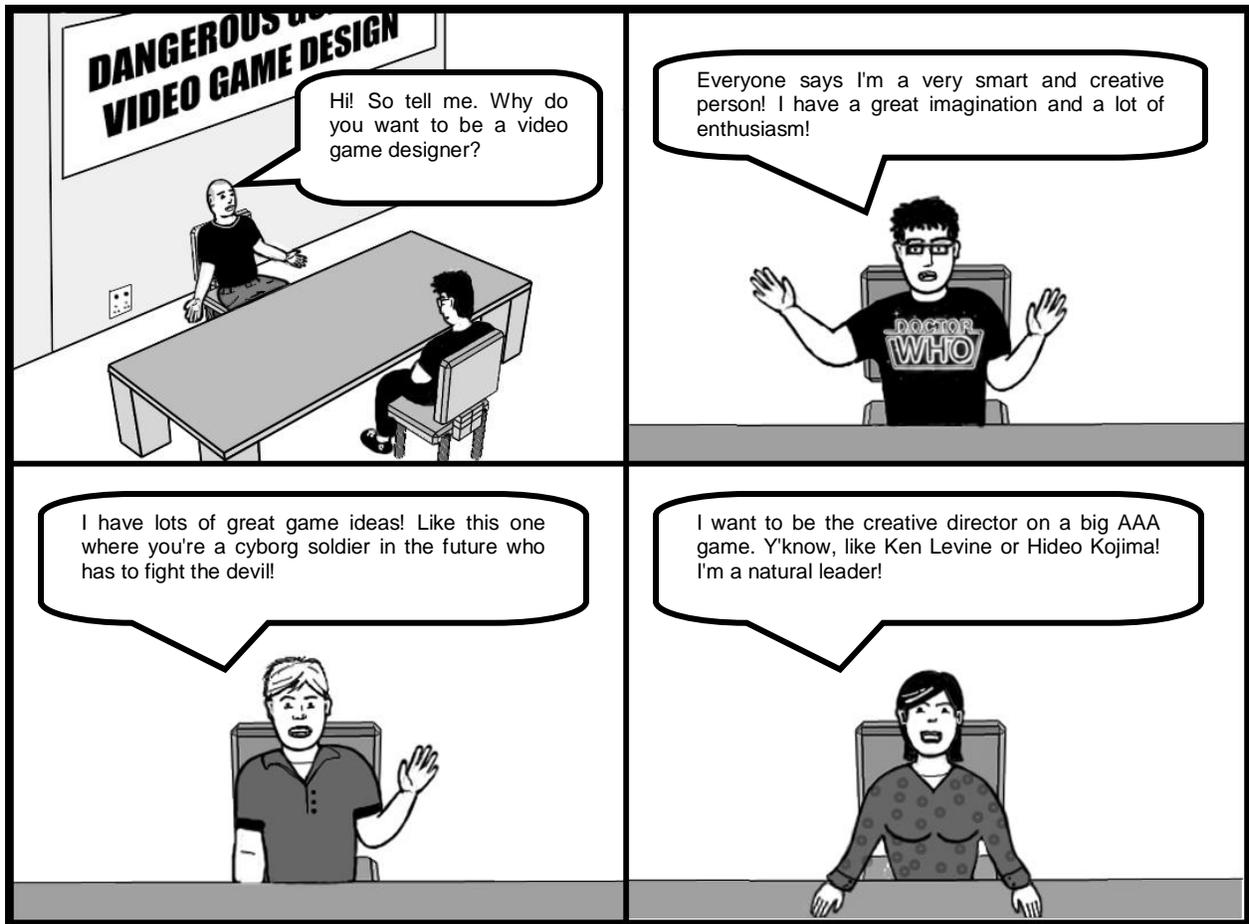
"...if you're not careful you may learn something!" - Bill Cosby (from the Fat Albert show).

Oh hey! How's it going? Thanks for checking out my book! Whether you're reading this in a classroom or sitting in bed trying to get to sleep or maybe taking a few extra minutes in the bathroom, I'm really excited you decided to spend some time with me! Now, just in case it's missing the front cover<sup>1</sup>, I'll quickly tell you what this book is all about: **video game design and development!** There are a lot of books available on this subject, but most of them deal with theory and hardly any of them talk about the most important thing you need to know: **to design fun video games, you must love video games!** Is the word love a little too strong? Does it make you uncomfortable? How about if you just really like-like video games? As somebody who may not realize what this love really means in practical terms, you can start with this simple exercise. Think about the last video game you played. What did you like about it? What did you hate about it? If the answer to any of those questions is "*I dunno*" (which is a legitimate answer I've heard from a ton of different people wanting to get into video game design) then you need to ask yourself one more very important question, "*Why do I want to be a video game designer?*" Well, maybe you should ask yourself that question anyway....

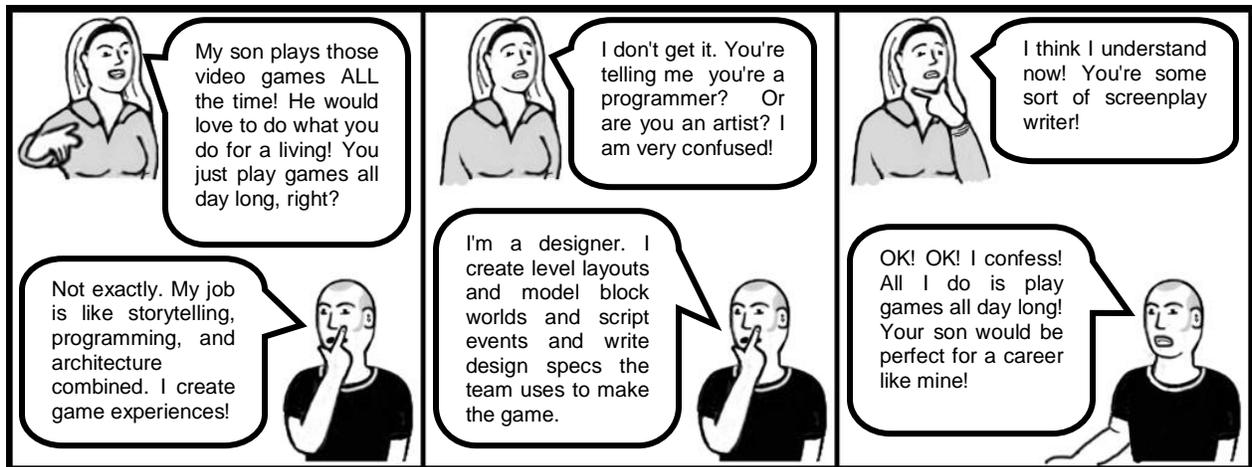


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<sup>1</sup> This is just the first of many potentially pointless footnotes which you are free to skip without hurting my feelings, ok? Alright, so one of my less savory jobs (at a now extinct retail book store that rhymes with Baldwin Cooks) was ripping the covers off hundreds of paperbacks. Basically, in order to get reimbursed for unsold books, the retailer needed to send the ISBN (International Standard Book Number) code back to the publisher and it was cheaper just to send the covers back rather than the whole book! If you look at the copyright page of a typical paperback, you'll see something like, "if you purchased this book without a cover, you should be aware that this book is stolen property. It was reported as unsold and destroyed to the publisher..." Interesting, huh? Maybe not so interesting if you're reading this on a Kindle or iPad...



None of these folks have given us particularly bad answers. Unrealistic? Perhaps. We all start our future somewhere with ideas in our heads of where we're going and how we're going to get there. For example, when I was a kid I wanted to write comic books and direct movies and play guitar in a band. Oh, and I wanted to be a veterinarian too! The problem is that we have no way of bending time to our will in order to see exactly what steps we'll need to take to realize our ambitions. What we do have is the experience of others: parents, mentors, teachers, books, museums, the internet, etc. A major goal of this book is to present a set of realistic expectations about professional video game design. This way your aspirations can be properly aligned with the realities of working in the video game industry. By the time you reach the end of this book, you will have reached your own conclusions and they may be vastly different than what you thought when you cracked the book open for the first time! A good place to start setting expectations is with a definition of what a video game designer does. Do you know?



There is a common misconception in the public eye that everybody who works in the video game industry is a "game designer". Many schools are offering courses and degrees in video game design that have everything to do with 3D art and very little to do with actual game design. Perhaps a better, more generalized term would be "game developer". Think of it this way: not everyone who works in the film industry is a film producer or director. Actually, here's a less confusing (for all parties) definition of what a **video game designer** actually does:

**A video game designer helps create interactive experiences that are, hopefully, fun.**

Let's take a closer look at that definition:

- "*A video game designer helps create...*" – for most video game productions, design is the creative engine that keeps all other departments moving forwards toward a common goal. "*Help*", in this context, is meant to emphasize the collaborative nature of video game design because it takes a lot of people to make a video game.
- "*...interactive experiences...*" - video games are about rules, player interaction, feedback, and reward. In most cases, games with more interaction are generally more fun. For example, what's more entertaining: sailing around the Great Sea looking for islands in the Legend of Zelda the Wind Waker or kicking a bunch of demonic ass in Bayonetta? One of a game designer's most difficult tasks is to create a gameplay space where the player is challenged AND feels like they are in control.
- "*...that are...fun...*" – if you do happen to prefer leisurely sailing over fast paced butt kicking (or vice versa), then you should understand that "fun" is a subjective concept! The experience of having fun means different things to different people, but the pursuit of fun (in all its forms) should be the ultimate goal of all video game designers!
- "*...hopefully...*" – here's the kicker: there is no magic formula for creating fun. Some games are fun at an early stage of development while other games really come together at the last possible second. Other games end up dead on arrival for any number of reasons: a lack of development time, broken game mechanics, bad box art, etc. Over time, experience helps developers mitigate some of these potential causes for failure, but there are possibly more reasons for something to go wrong than there are reasons for something to go right!

So, how about some quick, realistic insights into what it's like to be a designer in the video game industry?

You will work with amazingly talented people.

You will work with some surprisingly inept people.

You will work long hours because you love what you do.

You will work very long mandatory hours and weekends (something we lovingly call “**crunch**”) because you are told to.

You will get free or low cost soda.

You won't drink enough water.

You will work on projects you love.

You will work on projects you don't like.

You will be paid for your creativity.

You will not be paid enough for your creativity and you may be fired or laid off.

You will leave your mark on pop culture history.

**AND...**

You will see your game in the discount bin.

You will collaborate with teammates on fun gameplay mechanics.

Your project will suffer from a lack of communication.

You will be praised for your work.

Your work will be impacted by office politics.

You will work in a cool, inspirational environment surrounded by toys and games.

You will sit in a nondescript cube.

You will seldom be able to agree where to eat lunch because there are so many yummy choices.

You will be fed the same high calorie, fatty food at the office night after night.

Back in my high school days, I had a physical education teacher named Coach Ron Nixon who was also my pre-algebra teacher and may have also taught part of the sex education class (maybe that's why I think about linear equations during intercourse?). Anyway, he was a large, imposing man with a severe flattop haircut and a gruff, no BS attitude. At the start of the year, Coach Nixon traditionally blew his whistle and then wrote the following statement up on the chalk board: *"the only dumb question is the one not asked"*. In the spirit of Coach Nixon, let's answer some obvious (though not necessarily dumb) questions you probably have at this point:

**Why should I read this book?** - You should read this book primarily because you're interested in video game design and maybe a career in video game development! Before I started this project, I looked through a ton of other video game design books. After getting past the sticker shock (most of the books average \$40 or more!), I discovered an abundance of theory, generalizations, and self-promotion, but very little useful information in relation to practical, real world video game design and development.

**Who the heck am I?** - I'm a senior game designer who's been making games long enough to remember Deluxe Paint<sup>2</sup>, shape tables, and peeking and poking (sounds funny, but that was the terminology used to address memory on the Apple II+). I've worked on over 30 games during my career. A few of them have been big hits, a couple have broken even, and the rest of them have been a variety of underperformers and outright failures. Hit or miss, I've learned incredible lessons from all of them! Unlike most other authors, I don't claim to be an expert in my field. Despite my years of experience, the very notion of being an "expert" does a HUGE disservice to the essential, collaborative nature of the industry. Don't be fooled by "experts". Experience does not automatically equal expertise. When it comes to video game design, "expertise" is a collective term which exists only when the right group of people come together to make something wonderful.

**What makes this book so DANGEROUS?** - The very notion of danger evokes both innate trepidation and an equally compelling desire to explore. It's the reason we venture into dark dungeons or climb Mount Everest or jump out of an airplane. This book is a compilation of experiences, conversations, strange stories, and exercises that are intended to give a practical look at the world of video game development. However, the inherent danger of this book is that it may not always paint the most optimistic, cheery portrait of an industry that is far from being the Chocolate Factory that most people imagine it to be. This book will not guarantee you a job or turn you into the next Ken Levine (Bioshock) or Fumito Ueda (Shadow of the Colossus). It's not meant to be used as a textbook despite the mention of "rules" or "best practices". What this book will give you is a great deal of background in video game design as well as some applicable exercises and a solid grounding in the vocabulary of game design.

Oh, and while we're on the topic of danger, it would probably be a good idea for me to put out a disclaimer.....

I consider myself VERY fortunate to be in an industry where my creativity is an asset and I'm given a medium to express it. Every day I work with amazing groups of people on very cool projects. However, creativity can is not a switch many people can turn on and off on a whim. It's dependent on many things: inspiration, timing, mood, surroundings, etc. Think of it like this - have you ever had a really amazing dream and then woken up in the morning and had it gradually disappear from your memories? That's what ideas are like. Given the fragile nature of creativity, it shouldn't be surprising that the work environment is one of the biggest factors in a project's success or failure. Companies that treat their employees well are generally successful. Companies that treat their employees poorly run the risk of employee dissatisfaction, attrition, and outright failure. This book is full of all sorts of stories of things that have happened during my time in the industry. I may ruffle a few feathers with some of these tales, but it's important that people and companies are accountable for both their successes and failures and this only happens with a degree of honesty that's considered a little taboo at times.

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<sup>2</sup> Deluxe Paint (also lovingly referred to as DPaint) was a bitmap-based art tool that originally appeared on the Commodore Amiga before being widely distributed by Electronic Arts in the 1990's. Everything from Monkey Island to John Madden Football used the tool to create environments and sprites.

In the following pages, you'll read about all sorts of wonderful people, but also a rogue's gallery of bullies, crappy bosses, slackers, and power trippers who fell short of their dreams and took other people down the road to failure with them. Thankfully, these folks are in the minority when it comes to the pool of talent out there, but that doesn't mean we can't learn from the painful lessons they've left behind and become better people to ourselves and our teammates in the process! To be fair and protect the stability of my job, the names of some people, companies, and projects have been changed. If you see yourself in this book somewhere (for better or for worse), you should know that I owe you a debt of gratitude. I couldn't have made it this far without you!